

April 1, 2009

Michigan Legislature
Joint Committee Hearing
Senate Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs
House Great Lakes and Environment

Honorable Chairs, Senators and Representatives:

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you in this historic moment. I cannot adequately express the gratitude that I feel as a result of your movement of this important issue to the forefront of legislative discussion.

I have been involved in matters of public recreation for the past 30 plus years. After graduation from Eastern Michigan, my career in parks and recreation began in Washtenaw County, followed by employment with Saginaw County, the City of Saginaw, Wayne County, and finally the City of Detroit. I participated in committees and leadership with Michigan State Cooperative Extension, Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, the National Parks and Recreation Association, the Governor's Recreation Advisory Committee, the President's Commission on American's Outdoors, Michigan State Parks Citizen's Advisory Committee, and The Natural Resources Commission.

I now serve as a pastor at an historic urban church and see the need for outdoor recreation on a whole different level. I have been able to expand the horizons of so many young people by exposing them to the unique value of our state and local parks facilities. This experience has become precious as budget woes have caused municipalities to reduce and, in some cases, eliminate local parks and recreation programs. The value of these state parks increases exponentially their quality of life.

It is quickly becoming apparent that there is need for a whole new conservation movement that will teach and enlarge upon the ethic that appreciates the beauty of our landscape, the protection of the resources, and an enjoyment of the unique flora and fauna of our state.

These collective experiences have given me enough background to understand the weight of today's hearing. In all these years there have been a few consistent issues. We, in Michigan, are blessed to have some of the most unusual and significant natural areas protected and provide for public enjoyment through our parks. We also have a population that has proven time and again that the protection and programming of these parks are a high priority to them. We have seen them managed by the most caring and conscientious professional staff, who have emerged as national leaders in their field of interest. We have a wonderful system of state and local parks and recreation facilities.

We have also witnessed the constant challenge of offering these facilities to the public in an affordable and equitable manner. Funding has always been an issue, priority consideration for acquisition, development and programming is a constant battle on every level. It is clear that the decision makers understand the quality of life value of these facilities and programs, but recognize the conflict that comes with allocations for mandated services versus these important services.

Study after study of the social implications of parks and recreation support the need for parks on every level of government. The positive impact of recreation on every demographic has been validated time and again. The unique experiences that can only be appreciated in state parks are enhanced by the local and regional experiences. It all works together.

The bills before this committee reflect years of frustration by legislators, professionals, and educators who have wrestled with the challenge of funding parks. The ebb and flow of economics has caused these important facilities and programs to react, diminishing the consistency of services. It is only the commitment and creativity of the community of providers that has sustained parks to the level that we now see.

The support of external funding mechanisms such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Act, Michigan Land Trust Fund, and the Michigan Recreation Bond program has augmented acquisition and development of facilities and resources. There has, however, never been a real concerted effort to undergird the operations until now.

This committee will hear from individuals who will provide specific financial information, detailing how this measure will support operations of the state parks system. We will see the inclusion of local recreation enhancement placed in the conversation. But most importantly, for the first time, we will see the creation of a "Passport to Recreation" for all of the residents of Michigan. This will not only increase opportunities for existing users, but will encourage a whole new wave of recreationist, conservationists, and outdoor enthusiasts.

I encourage this committee to fully support the bills. Create this "passport" so that the generations that will follow us will have the same benefits, improved opportunities, and an ethic that enjoys this wonderland called "MICHIGAN!"

Testimony submitted by:

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